

Evolution of Sponsorship

CLARENCE SNYDER was one of the first 100 sober members of AA and responsible for the separation of AA from the Oxford group, for calling that group Alcoholics Anonymous (which will be covered in another issue), and redefining the model for what we now call “sponsorship.”

In the Oxford Groups your sponsor was the man who co-signed for your admission to the medical detox. Drunks were notorious for not paying their bills and without a co-signer, the hospital would not admit them for alcoholism. Remember, at this time alcoholism was not a recognized disease and most admissions were for “gastric distress.”

The sponsor then worked with the new man on what we would now call the first Six Steps. According to Clarence S, their first responsibility was helping the new man find his faith as a Christian.

This means that before the new man went to his first meeting he had been in a hospital detox with a Sponsor visiting to guide and, quiet time with prayer and meditation had been established and he had worked with a sponsor successfully to admit his own alcoholism, turned his life and will over to his new understanding of God or Higher Power, made inventory of his past, shared it with his sponsor and become willing to have his defects removed.

You could not simply “go to a meeting” - there was no meeting guide. You had to know someone who knew. The sponsor also took responsibility for the man he brought to the meeting - if the new man broke or stole something, it was for the sponsor to set it right.

The new man entered his first meeting after having done what we would call the first six steps with his sponsor, on his knees, praying with the group to have his defects removed. It was also common in Akron for the “old men” of the group to take the newcomer upstairs to confirm that this candidate was an actual “member” of the group.

You had to be approved for membership by the existing members.



Clarence changed this definition of Sponsor to a much simpler – “someone who is ahead of you in the program and willing to show you what they had done,” which is what we think of a Sponsor to be now.

With Clarence’s influence, the Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper began running articles on Alcoholics Anonymous (written by a member of Clarence’s group), the archdiocese approved the non-Oxford Group fellowship as appropriate for Catholics, and the Cleveland Fellowship grew at a rate that surprised Bill and Bob.

In 1938 there were two groups; one in Akron and one in New York. In 1939 there were five; three groups formed quickly in Cleveland without Bill or Bob to guide them, but with Clarence’s push, the new form of Sponsorship and the use of the Big Book for new members. When the Saturday Evening Post article by Jack Alexander appeared in 1941, it was estimated there were approximately 400 members in the three cities (members of those groups who were on the road as “traveling salesmen”). Immediately after the appearance of the article, the membership jumped from 400 to over 8,000.

Thousands of people read the Post article, wrote to New York to make contact with the existing groups or got a copy of the Big Book and formed their own group. The new groups used the Big Book for group study and did the personal work of the Steps. There were so many new people that there were not enough Sponsors to serve everyone, so several of the new groups began “Newcomer” or “Beginner’s” classes to introduce the new people to the tools of the program, the use of the book, the Steps and getting into the new life.

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